

Timely or Timeless?

The Scholar's Dilemma. Thoughts on Open Access and the Social Contract of Publishing

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Introduction

Some things don't change.

We live in a world seemingly over-saturated with information, yet getting it out there in both an appropriate form and a timely fashion is still challenging. Publishing, although the meaning of the word is undergoing significant change in the time of iPads and Kindles, is still a very complex business. In spite of a much faster, cheaper and simpler distribution process, producing scholarly information that is worth publishing is still hard work and so time-consuming that the pace of traditional academic communication sometimes seems painfully slow in comparison to the blogosphere, Wikipedia and the ever-growing buzz of social networking sites and microblogging services. How idiosyncratic does it seem in the age of cloud computing and the real-time web that this electronic volume is published one and a half years after the event its title points to? Timely is something else, you might say.

Dan Cohen, director of the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, discusses the question of why academics are so obsessed with formal details and consequently so slow to communicate in a blog post titled "The Social Contract of Scholarly

Publishing". In it, Dan retells the experience of working on a book together with colleague Roy Rosenzweig¹:

"So, what now?" I said to Roy naively. "Couldn't we just publish what we have on the web with the click of a button? What value does the gap between this stack and the finished product have? Isn't it 95% done? What's the last five percent for?"

We stared at the stack some more.

Roy finally broke the silence, explaining the magic of the last stage of scholarly production between the final draft and the published book: "What happens now is the creation of the social contract between the authors and the readers. We agree to spend considerable time ridding the manuscript of minor errors, and the press spends additional time on other corrections and layout, and readers respond to these signals — a lack of typos, nicely formatted footnotes, a bibliography, specialized fonts, and a high-quality physical presentation — by agreeing to give the book a serious read."

A social contract between author and reader. Nothing more, nothing less.

It may seem either sympathetic or quaint how Roy Rosenzweig elevates the product of scholarship from a mere piece of more or less monetizable content to something of cultural significance, but he also aptly describes what many academics, especially in the humanities, think of as the essence of their work: creating something *timeless*. That is, in short, why the humanities are still in love with books, why they retain a pace of publishing that is entirely snail-like, both to other academic fields and to the rest of the world. Of course humanities scholars know as well as anyone that nothing is truly timeless and understand that trends and movements shape scholarship just like they shape fashion and music. But there is still a commitment to spending time to deliver something to the reader that is a polished and perfected as one can manage. Something that is not rushed, but refined.

¹ <http://www.dancohen.org/2010/03/05/the-social-contract-of-scholarly-publishing/>.

Why? Because the reader expects authority from a scholarly work and authority is derived from getting it right to the best of one's ability.

This is not just a long-winded apology to the readers and contributors to this volume, although an apology for the considerable delay is surely in order, especially taking into account the considerable commitment and patience of our authors (thank you!). Our point is something equally important, something that connects to Roy Rosenzweig's interpretation of scholarly publishing as a social contract. This publication contains eight papers produced to expand some of the talks held at the Berlin 6 Open Access Conference that took place in November 2008 in Düsseldorf, Germany. While Open Access has successfully moved forward in the past eighteen months and much has been achieved, none of the needs, views and fundamental aspects addressed in this volume – policy frameworks to enable it (Forster, Furlong), economic and organizational structures to make it viable and sustainable (Houghton; Gentil-Beccot, Mele, and Vigen), concrete platforms in different regions (Packer et al) and disciplines (Fritze, Dallmeier-Tiessen and Pfeiffenberger) to serve as models, and finally technical standards to support it (Zier) – none of these things have lost any of their relevance.

Open Access is a timely issue and therefore the discussion about it must be timely as well, but “discussion” in a highly interactive sense is hardly ever what a published volume provides anyway – that is something the blogosphere is already better at. That doesn't mean that what scholars produce, be it in physics, computer science, law or history should be hallowed tomes that appear years after the controversies around the issues they cover have all but died down, to exist purely as historical documents. If that happens, scholarship itself has become a museal artifact that is obsolete, because a *total* lack of urgency will rightly suggest to people outside of universities that a field lacks relevance. If we don't care when it's published, how important can it be?

But can't our publications be both timely and timeless at once? In other words, can we preserve the values cited by Roy Rosenzweig, not out of some antiquated fetish for scholarly works as perfect docu-

ments, but simply because thoroughly discussed, well-edited and proofed papers and books (and, for that matter, blog posts) are nicer to read and easier to understand than hastily produced ones? Readers don't like it when their time is wasted; this is as true as ever in the age of information overload. Scientists are expected to get it right, to provide reliable insight and analysis. Better to be slow than to be wrong. In an attention economy, perfectionism pays a dividend of trust.

How does this relate to Open Access? If we look beyond the laws and policy initiatives and platforms for a moment, it seems exceedingly clear that access is ultimately a solvable issue and that we are fast approaching the point where it will be solved. This shift is unlikely to happen next month or next year, but if it hasn't taken place a decade from now our potential to do innovative research will be seriously impaired and virtually all stakeholders know this. There is growing political pressure and commercial publishers are increasingly experimenting with products that generate revenue without limiting access. Historically, universities, libraries and publishers came into existence to solve the problem of access to knowledge (intellectual and physical access). This problem is arguably in the process of disappearing, and therefore it is of pivotal importance that all those involved in spreading knowledge work together to develop innovative approaches to digital scholarship, instead of clinging to eroding business models. As hard as it is for us to imagine, society may just find that both intellectual and physical access to knowledge are possible without us and that we're a solution in search of a problem. The remaining barriers to access will gradually be washed away because of the pressure exerted not by lawmakers, librarians and (some) scholars who care about Open Access, but mainly by a general public that increasingly demands access to the research it finances. Openness is not just a technicality. It is a powerful meme that permeates all of contemporary society.

The ability for information to be openly available creates a pressure for it to be. Timeliness and timelessness are two sides of the same coin. In the competitive future of scholarly communication, those who get everything (mostly) right will succeed. Speedy and open publica-

tion of relevant, high quality content that is well adjusted to the medium and not just the reproduction of a paper artifact will trump those publications that do not meet all the requirements. The form and pace possible will be undercut by what is considered normal in individual academic disciplines and the conventions of one field will differ from those of another. Publishing less or at a slower pace is unlikely to be perceived as a fault in the long term, with all of us having long gone past the point of informational over-saturation. The ability to effectively make oneself heard (or read), paired with having something meaningful to say, will (hopefully) be of increasing importance, rather than just a high volume of output.

Much of the remaining resistance to Open Access is simply due to ignorance, and to murky premonitions of a new dark age caused by a loss of print culture. Ultimately, there will be a redefinition of the relativities between digital and print publication. There will be a place for both: the advent of mass literacy did not lead to the disappearance of the spoken word, so the advent of the digital age is unlikely to lead to the disappearance of print culture. Transitory compromises such as delayed Open Access publishing are paving the way to fully-digital scholarship. Different approaches will be developed, and those who adapt quickly to a new pace and new tools will benefit, while those who do not will ultimately fall behind.

The ideological dimension of Open Access – whether knowledge *should* be free – seems strangely out of step with these developments. It is not unreasonable to assume that in the future, if it's not accessible, it won't be considered relevant. The logic of informational scarcity has ceased to make sense and we are still catching up with this fundamental shift.

Openness alone will not be enough. The traditional virtues of a publication – the extra 5% – are likely to remain unchanged in their importance while there is such a thing as institutional scholarship. We thank the authors of this volume for investing the extra 5% for entering a social contract with their readers and another, considerable higher percentage for their immense patience with us. The result may not be entirely timely and, as has been outlined, nothing is ever truly time-

less, but we strongly believe that its relevance is undiminished by the time that has passed.

Open Access, whether 2008 or 2010, remains a challenge – not just to lawmakers, librarians and technologists, but to us, to scholars. Some may rise to the challenge while others remain defiant, but ignorance seems exceedingly difficult to maintain. Now is a bad time to bury one's head in the sand.

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